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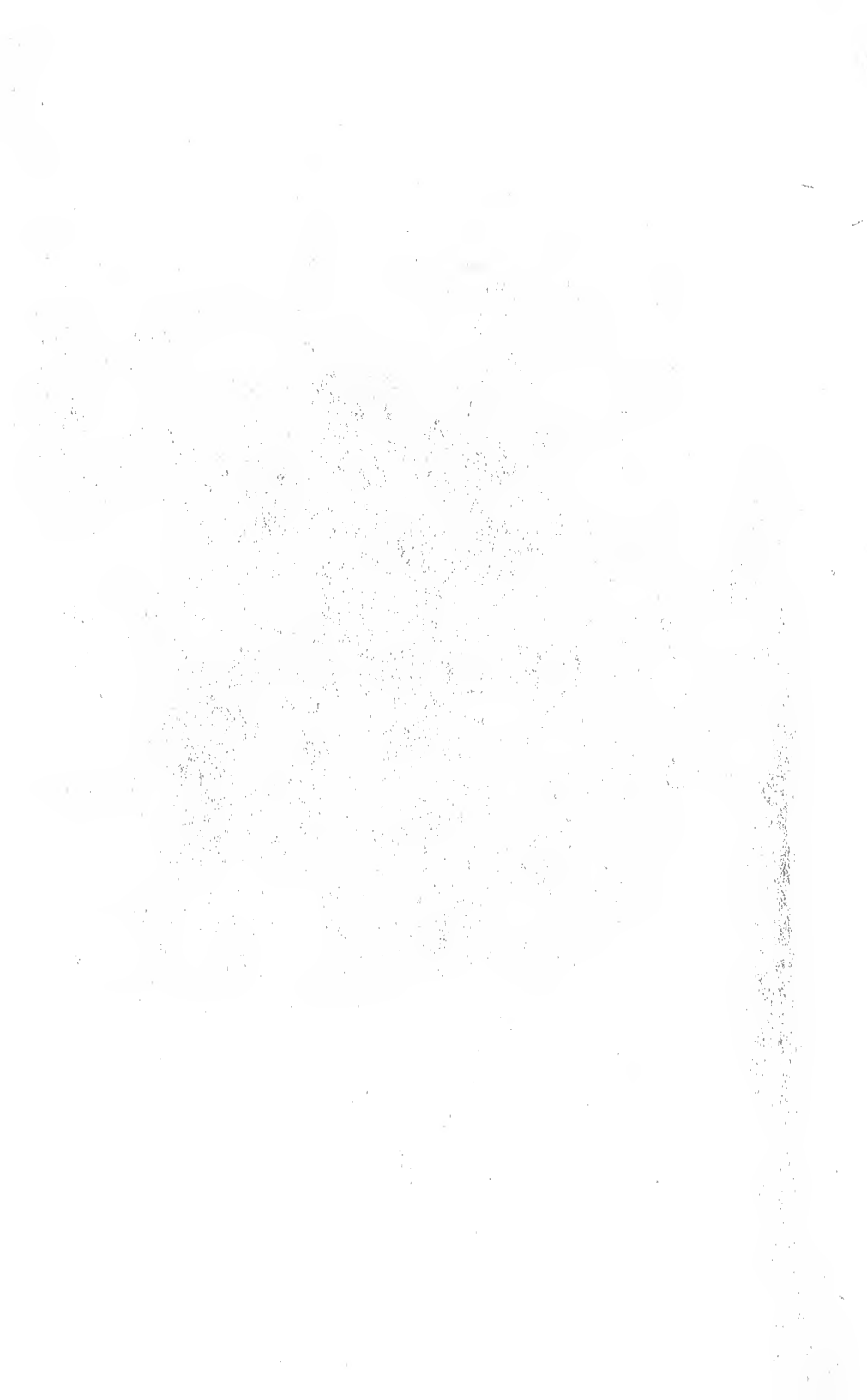
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THE DIVINE UNITY.

BY

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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

c

Rev C. D. Bradley

July 18. 1873.

“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE DIVINE UNITY.

THE truth of the Divine Unity is vastly greater and more significant than the doctrine of a simple personal monotheism. It is undoubtedly an advantage, both in intellectual and moral clearness, to have a distinct belief in one divine being, rather than in a plurality of gods. The conception in the mind is thus freed from obscurity and distraction, while the conscience is strongly re-enforced by the vision of a moral personality, eternally engaged in realizing an infinite ideal. This is really a profound truth. But is there not the revealing of a profounder truth still in the vision of God as a being all whose attributes are in harmony, who is wholly at one in his relations to Nature and humanity, whose kingdom is the essence both of authority and freedom, who is both sovereign Lord and universal Father, whose indisputable law has for its soul and spirit an eternal love, and the ideal of whose life is perpetually realizing itself in the perfecting of his creation? In Mr. Emerson's phrase, there is "a God of tradition and a God of rhetoric." We have to break from the teaching of past generations. We have to cease the use of language which is both too familiar and too inadequate an expression of a reverent thought. The consciousness of an indwelling divine Presence takes the place of a traditional authority. The sense of the Ineffable hushes the lips to a devout silence.

“Then may God fire the heart with his presence. It is the infinite enlargement of the heart,” he says, “with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side. It inspires in man an infallible trust. He has not the conviction, but the sight, that the best is the true, and may in that thought easily dismiss all particular uncertainties and fears, and adjourn to the sure revelation of time the solution of his private riddles.” In such a sense as this, the Divine Unity is the truth of truths, — the most joyous, the most animating, the most encouraging, the most inspiring, and the most quickening of truths.

We can readily understand, that in the nature of Deity, both attributes of being and qualities of character must be at one. Eternity and infinity, omnipotence and omniscience, wisdom, power, and love must consist with each other. There cannot be any conflict or discord among them. It is true, that when we attempt to define, we find ourselves limited within the boundaries of human knowledge, and so we fail to comprehend the truth in its fulness. The confession that we make to ourselves is by no means singular. The mystery of the divine Being continues unsolved. The language of the old patriarch is not altogether a foreign tongue: —

“Behold I go forward, but he is not there ;
 And backward, but I cannot perceive him ;
 On the left hand where he doth work, but I cannot behold him ;
 He hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him,
 But he knoweth the way that I take !”

Still, there are other ways of knowing than through the processes of the mind. The spirit within us, with its consciousness of God, and in full alliance with the divine spirit, sees, feels, knows, and trusts. It searches all things, even the deep things of God. It moves through

all the devout, reverent, and aspiring attitudes of the soul; through all its experience of struggle, striving, prayer, and praise; through its jubilant strains of exulting joy; through its agonizing cry for help in temptation and sorrow; through its penitence and its piety; through its defeats and triumphs. The spirit is of God and heareth God's words, and the glory of its revealings fairly irradiates and fully illumines all the way of life. Divine attributes become manifest to the spiritual consciousness. The divine Being comes within the circle of human knowledge. In the vocabulary of the spirit the word "unknowable" is not to be found. The pure in heart see God. Speaking through saints, apostles, prophets, the Christ of God, and all godly men and women, the spirit has declared that in God, beneath all superficial incongruity and dissonance, is the only true being and essential substance of life. In the complete unity of this being and substance with itself and its manifestations, the spirit finds the solution of every question and the composition of every perplexing doubt.

This being true, how can it ever be said that there is any conflict between the divine justice and the divine mercy? The declaration springs from the lack of spiritual power in the comprehension of the Divine Unity, and also from the fatal facility with which we ascribe to the divine character the possession of qualities which we find in ourselves. There is a certain conflict between the gentler and the sterner feelings of the human soul, and we are too ready to think that the same conflict exists in the divine character. Must the divine mercy wait until the divine justice is satisfied? Or is the divine justice to stay its hand at the call of the divine mercy? Must the sacrifice for sin be found before the sin can be forgiven? Does God love his erring child, and yet is he unable to

save him until justice has had its due? Let us be satisfied to know that there can be no such duality in the divine character as is thus suggested. The divine justice is always merciful and the divine mercy is always just. I am glad to be in the hands of a just God, who will always give me my deserts. I am quite sure that he would permit me to order my way before him. Would "He contend with me in the greatness of his power? Nay, but he will give heed to my words." I look to him with perfect confidence. I know that human justice errs; and in its narrowness of vision—nay, in its blindness holding the scales in which human actions are weighed—it does not always see the right. Herbert Spencer has lately said, that "sympathy, which a generation ago was taking the shape of justice, is relapsing into the shape of generosity; and the generosity is exercised by inflicting injustice." If this be true, it is but additional proof of the loss we have sustained in our imperfect idea of the divine government. We have still to learn that what is most just is most merciful, and that a true generosity does not inflict injustice. Especially must we avoid the error of confounding retaliation with justice. I am glad to feel that I am not altogether in the hands of men. I am to be judged by One who is absolutely impartial. Punished in my sin, as I deserve to be, and as I certainly shall be,—chastened in my sorrow, blessed in my pain, benefited in my loss, I know that all this is done in justice; and I also know that it is done in mercy. God is both merciful and just. One quality does not lag behind the other. Both go hand in hand through the divinely appointed way. One does not wear a different aspect from the other. Duty, in Wordsworth's language, is a "stern law-giver." Yet doth she "wear the God-head's most benignant grace."

“Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face ;
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds,
And fragrance in thy footing treads.
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
And the most ancient heavens, through thee, are
fresh and strong.”

In God surely justice and mercy are one, and we can trustfully rest in the assurance that toward all God's children they will be exercised in a truly divine way. Has man anything to fear? He has everything to hope for, when his hope is in God.

The same course of thought leads to the declaration that the divine sovereignty and the divine paternity are one. Do we address God as the King of kings? It is well. The divine Ruler commands among the armies of heaven and the inhabitants of earth. Heaven and earth stand in awe of him. His dread decrees are to be obeyed implicitly and without question. His eternal purposes work themselves out to a full execution, and there can be no stay in the process. The divine power sweeps resistlessly along its course like a mountain glacier, hard, cold, pitiless, without haste, without rest, carrying desolation and destruction in its path. Is there no warmth in the plain below, to melt and soften its rigidity and convert it into a fertilizing stream to make the field glad with flowers and grain? What can the human soul do, beneath the crushing force of the divine sovereignty, but accept its fate with a stolid acquiescence in that which is inevitable? No prayers, no tears, no agonizing repentance can avail to turn aside the inexorable decree that has gone forth even from the foundation of the world. The divine sovereign sits upon the throne of the universe, unapproachable in his majesty, except through some mediating personage; ineffable in his dread name; terrible

in his doing toward the children of men. Let all the earth keep silence before him! Man, his subject, cannot look upon his face and live. Prostrate before this divine despot, the human soul cowers and cringes with intolerable fear, or flees for safety, hoping that the darkness will hide it from the frowning face of an angry God.

But, no! This is not an adequate conception of him whose dominion is everlasting, and whose kingdom ruleth over all. We look again with a clearer vision. The divine sovereign is the divine parent. We approach his presence with joy and thanksgiving. He is not an invisible deity carefully concealed from the eyes of his children. He lifts upon them the light of his countenance; and they only really live when they look into his face with an entire confidence and trust, and feel all their inner being irradiated with his glory. It is not with fearful and halting steps that they enter into his courts, but with a blithe, eager, and expectant spirit, because they know that they will be welcome. It is not a royal palace, guarded by vigilant sentinels, overawing all who approach with its splendor and its state, but it is the home of the spirit, — every room in the spacious mansion filled with good cheer, kindly hospitality, and paternal love. It is not the worship of the prostrate body, the bowed head, the bended knee, but the uplifted face shining with the light of a sincere love, and the eye beaming with the light of filial recognition. The divine sovereign is the divine father. He is calling continually to each one of us, high or humble as may be, “My son! my daughter! come to me, — dismiss thy fears; receive my blessing; share in my infinite good; live forever in my own eternal life!”

In the divine kingdom, too, the same unity prevails. In a kingdom there must be authority. Law must pre-

vail. But while the will of him who rules the kingdom is supreme, his love is boundless. Authority consents with freedom. The will of man accords with the divine will, and thus he enters into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. Man is not the subject of a power from whose decisions there can be no appeal. But he is the self-governing citizen of a divine commonwealth. "As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the son to have life in himself." It is because the truly enlightened conscience is the revealer of the in-dwelling God, that the authority is an original and dynamic power, dwelling within the human soul that is conscious of its God. Such a power is always joyously exercised. Obedience then becomes, not compulsory, but wholly voluntary, — the human will responding with alacrity to the divine will. Thus it is that when a man is really conscious of being moved by the spirit of obedience to a divine command, he becomes as though he were inspired by a divine possession. He is filled with enthusiasm. He moves on to brave and heroic deeds. He forgets himself in his absorption in divine work. He is a fellow laborer with God. Even the common duty takes on dignity and power because it is helping even God himself to realize the divine ideal. Then, there is no enterprise too difficult, no danger too appalling, no death too painful for the child of God to endure. He counts it all joy that he is deemed worthy to suffer for the sake of duty, truth, his fellow men, and God. Thus martyrs have sung their hymns of rejoicing amidst the flames, saints and heroes have wrought their work for God and man, entering into fierce combats with pain and death, and winning the victory of virtue, — their weakness made strong, their weariness refreshed, the outward man perishing, the inward man perpetually renewed. The gladness

of the psalmist in the coming of the Lord to judge the earth in righteousness, the rapture of the prophet in the springing forth of peace and praise in the divine presence, the enthusiastic hope of Jesus and the apostles in the advent of the divine kingdom and the revealing of the sons of God, — all these are in the divine authority, and are also in the freed and growing and enlarging soul of obedient and trustful humanity. Truly new heavens and a new earth are here, wherein dwell righteousness and peace forever.

A step further in our thought brings us to the truth of the unity of the divine law and the divine love. Happy for the children of men that they are under the direction of him with whom is no variableness neither shadow cast by turning! Happy, indeed, that they are under the direction of a changeless law, which, both in its changelessness and its infinite elasticity, is working out for all an eternal good! Complex as human life is, and intricate as its lines appear to be, so that it sometimes seems like a labyrinth to which there is no clue, there yet must be, to the eye of him who can clearly see, a well-defined purpose running through the whole. The misfortune and the ill now manifest in the great calamities which send a thrill both of horror and sympathy through all human life; now in the petty annoyances and pestilent parasites, the end of whose creation seem shrouded in impenetrable mystery; again in the occult and insidious diseases that waste the human frame, baffling the skill of the physician, despoiling life of its enjoyment, hindering its usefulness and bringing it to an untimely end; still again in the extinction of beautiful, promising, and useful lives in their very prime, and the continuance of those which in human judgment seem actually to cumber the ground; yet once more in the sad personal blight, disappointment, and

heart-breaking bereavement that fairly desolate the soul, or in the terrible upheaval of social forces, in destructive war, in cruel slavery, in famine, pestilence, and plague, — all these aspects of life, which we call evil, are deeply provocative of questioning and doubt.

“Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

“I falter where I firmly trod;
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world’s altar stairs,
That slope through darkness up to God,

“I stretch lame hands of faith and hope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.”

Oh! how faintly do we trust the “larger hope” in the face of human sin and human sorrow, and Nature’s pitiless scourging of human life! Bewildered by the working of these great forces which seem to be utterly regardless of human suffering and the unspeakable woe of human hearts, we anxiously ask ourselves if this be the divine love of which we long to be partakers. Or is there in the universe a malevolent, as well as a benevolent spirit, and does Satan contend with God for the possession and government of the world? Surely we cannot believe in a dual God, an evil as well as a good spirit, a power that makes sport of human misery, an infernal force that sets at defiance the supernal deity. The universe is not large enough for two such beings. Inexplicable confusion, irremediable disorder would be the sure result. Our confidence in the universal order would be brought to an end.

It were better for us not to be at all. Is it in the limitation of our own powers, so that we can see but the outskirts of the divine ways, and hear but the whisper of the divine voice? Is it, that, like the weavers of the famous tapestry of France, we can only see the wrong side of the design upon which we are working, and do not know what figures of beauty, harmony, and grace our own feeble fingers are putting into the providential result?

We return to the truth of the unity of law and love. As the law governs the most vast and the most minute, the light and the darkness, the sunshine and the storm, so the love must touch, with its finger both of strength and tenderness, all the phases and forms of human experience. The same element is in the tornado and the zephyr. The fire is both useful and destructive, purifying even when it consumes. The lightning runs upon our most familiar errands, even though it may strike us dead. The water may drown us and rise in fury beneath the lashing of the tempest, but it floats our ships, carries in one form or another our industries to success, rises on invisible wings to temper the atmosphere, and falls again in genial showers upon our thirsty fields. Even disease has its uses and pain its ministry. The smallest thing, as well as the largest, hints the presence of universal power. The mote in the sunbeam feels the touch of the same great force that holds the stars in their places. The flower and the grass cannot grow at all except under the influence of a power which comes on unseen paths, through the wide spaces of the universe, to draw the little plant upward to the light and give it life. The sparrow, scarcely worth a farthing, cannot fall to the ground, or lift itself on joyful wing, without your Father. "It is all law," says Science, looking into the secrets of the universe. "It is all love," says Jesus, looking into the

deep things of God. There is a living spirit of goodness, — “an unspeakable beneficence,” — at the heart of things, and law and love are one.

We are led still further on, to the declaration that God is at one with Nature and Humanity. For if in all the attributes of his power and the qualities of his character he is one, then in all the manifestations and results of these, in the substance of things, in the works of His hands, and most of all in the living souls which become quickening spirits by the breathing of his love, he must also be one. That which is in Nature the informing and inspiring presence —

“ A motion and a spirit that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
 And rolls through all things ;
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky ” —

is also “in the mind of man.” What a trinity is this, — God, Nature, Humanity! What unity in trinity! The poets have sung the truth, the philosophers have found it the solution of their problems, the sages have seen it in their spiritual vision, the prophets have declared it in their burning words, the saints of God have rejoiced in it as the source and fountain of their trusting life, and Jesus, in his nearness to God and union with him, has made it the central truth of the religion that is to save mankind from every ill. It is God, with and within us, above, around, beneath, besetting all life behind and before, that is the inspiration, the power, the blessing of all pure, joyous, noble, heroic, divine living. Is it a divine incarnation, or a human apotheosis? Is it the descent of God? Is it not the ascent of man? For the child of God, rising to that high summit of spiritual

being where he can look over the wide expanse, sees God everywhere present, the light and life of all things. What, then, is the work of science, but to reveal the presence of God in all the universe of being? What has history to teach but the presence of the same infinite Being in all the growing and enlarging life of man? "With the living God to lead them on," says James Martineau, "the centuries must brighten as they roll, or if a darkness broods over them, must burst into richer sunshine after the passing storm. Life is to be spent not in sighs of regret, but in the joy of hope and the power of faith."

Finally, as the climax and culmination of our thought, we have to consider the unity of the infinite ideal, which is in the mind of God, and the vision of that ideal which, in the mind of man, beckons and impels him to the noblest and best life of which he is capable. It is not too much to say that the divine ideal is that of absolute perfection, and that the divine wisdom, power, and love are constantly exercised in Nature and in human life, with the purpose of making that ideal real. It is a God of perfect holiness that is to be revealed to human aspiration, knowledge, trust, and love. How can he be revealed and known, except to a perfect humanity; and how can humanity become perfect, except by keeping itself forever true to the divine ideal? "Be ye perfect, even as your Father is perfect!" says Jesus. It is this ideal that saves the world. It is the power that is in it, that inspires the best endeavor and the noblest life, which you and I are trying to make real. Lose it, and everything is lost. Lower it, and life becomes mean, sordid, and base. Cherish it, hold it fast, obey it, and there is a spirit in the life that sets manhood on to the perfection of its virtue and womanhood to the fulness of its beauty. Well

does Dr. Abbot say: "That divine passion for the finite ideal which makes the hero, the reformer, the prophet, the saint, is a spark of that eternal and ethereal fire, which burns at the very heart of being and keeps God himself true to his own infinite ideal." May I not add, that man, moved by the power of such passionate devotion to the ideal perfection, will himself create new heavens and a new earth, — fit dwelling-place for the perfect humanity that knows, loves, trusts, and obeys a perfect God!

"I report, as a man may, of God's work, — all's love yet all's law.
 Now I lay down the judgeship he lent me. Each faculty tasked
 To perceive him has gained an abyss, where a dewdrop was asked.
 Have I knowledge? Confounded it shrivels at Wisdom laid bare.
 Have I forethought? How purblind, how blank to the Infinite
 Care!

Do I task any faculty highest to image success?

I but open my eyes, and Perfection — no more and no less —
 In the kind I imagined, full fronts me, and God is seen God,
 In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul, and the clod!
 And thus looking within and around me, I ever renew,
 With that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it, too,
 The submission of man's nothing-perfect to God's all-complete,
 As by each new obeisance in spirit I climb to his feet!"





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